

[Source 1](#)

From Thomas Jefferson To General Breckinridge, March 1821.

...Nobody can doubt my zeal for the general instruction of the people. Who first started that idea? I may surely say, myself. Turn to the bill in the Revised Code, which I drew more than forty years ago, and before which the idea of a plan for the education of the people, generally, **had never been suggested in this State**. There you will see developed the first rudiments¹ of the whole system of general education we are now urging and acting on: and it is well known to those with whom I have acted on this subject, that I never have proposed a sacrifice of the primary to the ultimate grade of instruction. Let us keep our eye steadily on the whole system.”

[Source 2](#)

Notes on the State of Virginia, by Thomas Jefferson. Query XIV (pp. 156-59)

Page 159: For this purpose the reading in the first stage, where they will receive their whole education, is proposed, as has been said, to be **chiefly historical**. History by apprising² them of the past will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail³ them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views. **In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate and improve**. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories⁴. And to render even them safe their minds must be improved to a certain degree. This indeed is not all that is necessary, though it be essentially necessary. **An amendment of our constitution must here come in aid of the public education**. The influence over government must be shared among all the people. If every individual which composes their mass participates of the ultimate authority, **the government will be safe; because the corrupting the whole mass will exceed any private resources of wealth:** and public ones cannot be provided but by levies on the people. In this case every man would have to pay his own price. The government of Great-Britain has been corrupted, **because but one man in ten has a right to vote for members of parliament**. The sellers of the government therefore get nine-tenths of their price clear. It has been thought that corruption is restrained by confining the right of suffrage⁵ to a few of the wealthier of the people: but it would be more effectually restrained by an extension of that right to such numbers as would bid defiance to the means of corruption.

Lastly, it is proposed, by a bill in this revisal, to begin a public library and gallery, by laying out a certain sum annually in books, paintings, and statues.

[Source 3](#)

¹ Rudiment: Barely beginning.

² Apprising: To give notice; advise.

³ Avail: To be of use to; an advantage.

⁴ Depositories: Place; stored.

⁵ Suffrage: The right to vote.

From Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, 13 August 1786

DEAR SIR

....Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; **establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils,** and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.—The people of England, I think, are less oppressed than here. But it needs but half an eye to see, when among them, that the foundation is laid in their dispositions⁶, for the establishment of a despotism⁷. **Nobility, wealth, and pomp are the objects of their adoration.** They are by no means the free-minded people we suppose them in America. Their learned men too are few in number, and are less learned and infinitely less emancipated⁸ from prejudice than those of this country. An event too seems to be prospering, in the order of things, which will probably decide the fate of that country....”

TH: JEFFERSON

⁶ Dispositions: State of mind.

⁷ Despotism: Absolute authority by one.

⁸ Emancipated: Freed.